



FIGHTING WORDS

Suicide Voters

How Hamas dooms Palestine.

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Almost all our commentary on the Israel-Palestine dispute is unconsciously ethnocentric and practically every paragraph on the Hamas election victory has followed this bias by asking what it means either for the Israelis or for the “peace process.” It might be worth just thinking about what it could mean for the Palestinians.

The preferred analysis, which certainly derives from a kernel of fact, is that the vote represents a repudiation of the baroque corruption of the Arafat gang (which was so brilliantly anatomized by David Samuels in the *Atlantic* of September 2005). But there are at least two difficulties with this comforting conclusion. For one thing, anyone voting for a clerical party in the hope of abolishing corruption is asking to be considered a fool and also treated as one: There is corruption all over the Middle East, but it is nowhere as flagrant and exploitative and damaging as in the region’s two main theocracies, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Those who come to power as puritans lose no time in becoming positively gorgeous in the excess of their corruption, and Hamas will not be an exception to this rule.

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There is also an element of condescension in the “corruption” explanation. Hamas says that it wants an Islamic state all the way from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. It publishes and promulgates the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Why not assume that it is at least partly serious about all this? For years, the PLO leadership has been at least officially committed to a two-state solution and has at least officially made a distinction between Judaism and Zionism. It has also renounced the disgusting tactic of suicide murder. The emergence of a party that considers all of these evolutions as betrayals may have to do with something more than the provision of welfare. I am uncomfortably reminded of the tripe talked by many liberals and leftists about the Khomeini revolution in Iran in 1979, where it was said that religion was merely the form that protest against the corrupt and repressive shah happened to take, and that the mullahs could be contained.

It’s reasonably well-attested that the growth of Hamas originated partly with a very cynical Israeli decision to build up fundamentalism in Gaza as a weapon against the secular and leftist elements who were then running the Palestinian resistance. Gen. Yitzhak Segev, the military commander in the Strip, said as much to the *New York Times* in 1981. Whether that is true or not I don’t know, but I do remember sitting in the

Gaza garden of Dr. Haider Abdel-Shafi in the summer of 1981, after his clinic had been burned down by an Islamist mob shouting “God is great.” Dr. Abdel-Shafi was not a corrupt Fatah official but a very conscientious and skilled physician, who headed the Red Crescent in Gaza. (He later gave a brilliant opening speech, at the Madrid peace conference in 1991, as leader of the Palestinian civilian delegation.) Abdel-Shafi dryly noted to me that, for the first and only time in anyone’s memory, the Israeli occupation forces had not turned up to a scene of violent disorder, and had simply let the clinic burn.

These tactics of divide and rule must now presumably be a cause of regret to the Israelis who stupidly thought they were so cleverly manipulating the situation. But the position of a non-Muslim or even non-Hamas Palestinian might soon be very unenviable also. A significant number of Palestinians are at least nominally Christian and have traditionally voted for leftist and secular parties: In recent years their centers of population in towns like Nazareth and Bethlehem have come under increasing pressure to conform to “Islamic Republic” rules. “In the Islamist Palestinian state,” announced Hamas’ leader Mahmoud al-Zahar before the election, “every citizen will be required to act in accordance with the codes of Islamic law.” A Christmas report from Bethlehem in the *Wall Street Journal* made an attempt to grapple with this grievously underreported subject. It told of female Christian employees in the Bethlehem municipality who were being forbidden to greet male visitors with a handshake. It contained an interview with the leader of the Hamas group on the Bethlehem City Council, who announced his party’s intention to impose the *al-Jeziya* as soon as it was strong enough to do so. This is the tax, sometimes called the *dhimmi* or “unbeliever” tax, that is levied on all those who will not profess that there is one god and that Mohammed is his messenger. Aside from the offensiveness of this, imagine the opportunities for Ottoman-style corruption that it affords.

It is shallow and short-term, therefore, to write up the election result as a bitter fruit for the Bush administration’s democracy initiative. (What was the alternative? No elections? Elections but without Hamas participation? And do not forget that the combined vote for the four secular and leftist and independent lists, at a time of extreme pressure to conform to either Fatah or Hamas candidates, was over 112,000 ballots, or about a tenth of the total.) This is, rather, another stage in a process of coercive Islamization that has been going on for some time. The opposition party was

already better organized than, and had almost as many guns as, the nominal Palestinian “government.” It has a host of unemployed and semi-educated and well-armed young men, who will no doubt relish the task of bullying women and “unofficially” collecting the *al-Jeziya* revenues. Critics of the “road map” correctly pointed to the enclosure of Palestinians in ghettolike enclaves and Bantustans. Wait until you see what life looks like in a hermetic society, cut off by the Wall whose permanence this election almost certainly guarantees *and* subjected to Islamic rule.

It’s agonizing to watch the Palestinians choose a leadership that is openly aligned with the moribund and vicious dictatorships in Iran and Syria. The time when the PLO called for a democratic secular state seems a very long while ago. But just look at the primeval propaganda of Hamas, which speaks of a land that is holy to one god and dedicated only to his fanatical supporters. Where has one heard that evil rubbish before? Only imagine if the Israelis had been forced to recognize a West Bank and Gaza state when the PLO first accepted it 20 years ago. Ariel Sharon’s real monument will be the fact that he acknowledged all this at precisely the moment when it had become too late to do so. It becomes plainer than ever that Israel is not the alternative to the diaspora, but an especially embattled and compromised part of it.

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